

GODPARENTHOOD AND THE COUNCIL OF TRENT: CRISIS AND TRANSFORMATION OF A SOCIAL INSTITUTION (ITALY, XV-XVII CENTURIES)

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RESUMEN. En las sociedades europeas de la época moderna, a través del bautismo se establecía un particular tipo de parentesco, el parentesco espiritual, que involucraba a los padrinos, las madrinas, los recién nacidos y los progenitores. Los lazos nacidos de este tipo de parentesco eran sobre todo de naturaleza horizontal y tenían una gran importancia, al ser utilizados por los padres de los menores para establecer redes de alianza social. Hasta el Concilio de Trento fue normal que en muchas partes de Italia y Europa los pequeños tuviesen un gran número de padrinos, cuya elección venía determinada por la puesta en práctica de estrategias sociales de una cierta complejidad. El Concilio puso fin a esta costumbre al establecer un máximo de un padrino y una madrina por menor, lo que significó la estandarización y la uniformización de la enorme variedad de modelos de padrinzago existentes hasta entonces en el continente. Sin embargo, la imposición de un nuevo modelo de padrinzago basado en la pareja generó una serie de resistencias en las poblaciones locales no estudiadas hasta el presente, además de propiciar una rápida verticalización de las relaciones sociales asociadas al mismo. En adelante, el padrinzago contribuiría a fomentar y a reforzar en las relaciones de patronazgo social de las elites sobre los demás grupos que formaban parte de la sociedad. Todas estas cuestiones se abordan a partir de lo sucedido en el norte de Italia entre los siglos XV y XVII, gracias al manejo de una amplia y extensa base documental.

Palabras clave: padrinzago, parentesco espiritual, siglo XVI, siglo XVII, patronazgo, clientela, redes sociales, Concilio de Trento.

ABSTRACT. In European societies of the past, baptism was thought to be able to establish a particular kind of kinship (spiritual kinship) which involved godfathers, godmothers,

godchildren and their parents. Spiritual kinship ties had a great social importance and were used to establish networks of social alliance: the more so, given that up until the Council of Trent (ended in 1563) it was customary in many areas of Italy and of Europe to have lots of godparents. The ties of spiritual kinship were mainly horizontal, and selection of godparents followed complex strategies. The Council of Trent put an end to these ancient customs, by stating that a maximum of one godfather and one godmother could attend the ceremony. This caused the standardization of 'models' of godparenthood which had been very varied: the new, and clearly dominant, model being the 'couple model' (one godfather and one godmother). The social consequences of the reform of godparenthood, which was forcefully imposed to populations that tried vainly to resist, until recently were entirely unknown. The article aims at analyzing such effects on the base of a wealth of data for Northern Italy. It demonstrates that the reduction in the number of godparents caused the verticalization of godparenthood as a social institution: the only godfather left having often social status much higher than the parents of the baptized child. Godparenthood, then, stopped being an institution linking mainly social peers, and began resembling an instrument of social patronage. This also led Catholic Church to accept the fact that it was impossible to transform it in an useful pedagogical instrument to raise children in the Christian faith.

Keywords: Godparenthood; spiritual kinship; 16th century; 17th century; patronage; clientele; social networks; Council of Trent

1. Introduction

In European societies of the past, baptism did not merely represent a solemn and public recognition of the «natural» birth of a child¹. Rather it represented a second birth, a «spiritual birth», within a group of relatives normally different from that based on blood relations: the spiritual family, composed of godfathers and godmothers. For the Church, between the group of godfathers and godmothers on one side, godchildren and their parents on the other there was a tie of kinship, and consequently an impediment to marriage. Spiritual kinship ties had a great social importance, and were used in ways not always coherent with their religious meaning².

1 Trabajo recibido el 10/05/2008 y aceptado para su publicación el 1/10/2008.

This article presents some key results of a wider research, whose complete version has been published as a book in Italian, ALFANI, G.: *Padri, padrini, patroni. La parentela spirituale nella storia*, Venezia, 2006.

2 Before the Council of Trent an even greater extension was recognized to spiritual kinship coming from baptism. At the beginning of XVIth Century canon law stated the existence of spiritual kinship between godfather, godmothers and their spouses on one side, godchildren and their parents on the other side. Furthermore, there was spiritual kinship between godchildren and the children of their godparents, and between the baptised child and who baptised him. In any case, relationships between the child, his parents and his godfathers and godmothers (i.e. the actors of baptism) had a prominent position among the other relationships of spiritual kinship. It must be noted that, originally, godparenthood had been introduced for two different rites: baptism and confirmation, both thought to generate spiritual kinship. I

Up to now, spiritual kinship has been much less studied than «natural» kinship, even if there are signs that this is changing. As a result, many points remain to be clarified about the meaning given to spiritual kinship ties by those who were so connected, about its role in economic and social activity and about the transformations it underwent during the centuries³.

Even though the long term and the broader picture will always be borne in mind, I will focus here on a period almost completely neglected by godparenthood scholars: XVIth Century. This scarce interest is a strange fact that would be worthy of studies in itself. Actually, the above period is of crucial importance in the long history of this social institution, because the Council of Trent (1545-1563) set out to put an end to customs and practices that had been in use from time immemorial. The results it thus produced played an important role in shaping society in the following centuries: a fact of even greater interest considering that such results were largely unexpected.

As will be seen, before the Council of Trent in many places of Italy it was customary to give children a large number of godparents at baptism. The Council decreed that each baby could have only one godparent, or two as a maximum: one godfather and one godmother. This decision was applied in a comparatively short time, at least in Italy (from a few years to a couple of decades, according to places), and caused the crisis of many local customs. After having described the situation before the Council and having proposed some considerations about the role played by godparenthood in *ancien régime* societies, I will analyze in detail the phase of transition from the old «models» of godparenthood, regulated by customs, to the new «couple model» (one godfather and one godmother) imposed by Tridentine law. In fact, the attempts at resisting and at finding compromises with the Church, that are evident in many places, allow us to better understand the meaning given to godparenthood by Early Modern Age populations. Lastly, I will evaluate the degree

will focus myself here on baptismal godparenthood only. For the evolution of canon law on the mentioned themes, see CIMETIER, F.: «Parenté (empêchements de)», in VACANT, A. et al. (eds.): *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, Paris, 1932; IUNG, N.: «Cognatio spiritualis», in R. Naz (ed.), *Dictionnaire de droit canonique*, Paris, 1937; BAILEY, D. S.: *Sponsors at Baptism and Confirmation: An Historical Introduction to Anglican Practice*, New York, 1951.

3 Among the most recent studies concerning godparenthood, I shall limit myself to cite some books, FINE, A.: *Parrains, marraines. La parenté spirituelle en Europe*, Paris, 1994; HÉRITIER-AUGÉ, F. and COPET-ROUGIER, E.: *La parenté spirituelle*, Paris, 1995; SABEAN, D. W.: *Kinship in Neckarhausen, 1700-1870*, Cambridge, 1998; COSTER, W.: *Baptism and Spiritual Kinship in Early Modern England*, Aldershot, 2002. I contributed myself to this renewal of studies, ALFANI, G.: *Padri, padrini, patroni*, Op. cit. Even more recently, the constitution of the *Patrinus* scientific network has favoured new research on godparenthood and dissemination of the results (see website <http://www.ise.unibocconi.it/patrinus>). The network organised its first conference in St Etienne (France) in November 2007 (*Le Baptême, entre usages sociaux et enjeux idéologiques. XVIe-XXe siècle*, proceedings forthcoming) as well as four sessions at the European Social Science History Conference (Lisbon, February-March 2008).

of success of the Tridentine reform, underlining some unexpected turns of events that brought with them important social and cultural implications. It will also be the occasion for formulating some hypotheses about further developments of spiritual kinship in the following centuries, and for comparing Italian case with other ones.

2. Before the Council: the broken geography of customs

Between the end of XVth Century and the beginning of XVIth, many parishes of Northern Italy started keeping registers, in which to duly record baptisms as they were celebrated. These records included, besides the particulars of the baby, those of his godparents. The recording of godfathers and godmothers was aimed at preventing the occurrence of «spiritual incest»⁴.

These sources, often much earlier than the decree by the Council of Trent that imposed the keeping of such registers in the whole of Roman Catholic world, allow us to reconstruct the fundamental characteristics of the goodparenthood models in use until the first half of XVIth Century. In particular, they allow us to check with ease how many godfathers and godmothers it was customary to give to each child.

The data I shall present first (tables 1 and 2) are related to eight communities of Northern Italy (from West to East: Torino, Ivrea, Azeglio, Finale Ligure, Bellano, Voghera, Mirandola, Gambellara). These communities are placed in different areas, and in XVIth Century belonged to different political entities. Furthermore, each of them had different characteristics as regards dimension, social structure, economic activities and so on. All these factors probably exerted an influence on the choice of godfathers and godmothers, both in terms of the dimension and composition of the group inside which the parents of the baby could select godfathers and godmothers, and as regards the reasons for choosing one potential candidate instead of another. For the sake of brevity, I shall not give here extensive information about each community; I shall limit myself to recalling some elements of relevance, whenever necessary⁵.

4 It is important to note that, in the places that will be considered here, usually godparents and godmothers were chosen outside the boundaries of natural kinship, or at least outside that «close kinship» that can be revealed by comparison of surnames of children and godparents. This situation seems to have been common to the most of Europe, as noted by KLAPISH-ZUBER, Ch.: «Parrains et filleuls: Une approche comparée de la France, L'Angleterre et l'Italie médiévales», *Medieval Prosopography*, VI, 1985, pp. 51-77. See also, on this topic, ALFANI, G.: «I padrini: patroni o parenti? Tendenze di fondo nella selezione dei parenti spirituali in Europa (XV-XX secolo)», *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, Coloquios, 2008, and «Spiritual Kinship and the others. Ivrea, XVIth-XVIIth Centuries», *Popolazione e Storia*, I, 2006, pp. 57-80.

5 About the communities I studied, I shall limit myself to giving some brief information, however helpful in contextualizing them from a geographical and political point of view, and in suggesting the existence of an urban or rural environment and of a more or less complex society. Much of the demographic data is taken from BELOCH, K.: *Bevölkerungsgeschichte Italiens*, Berlin-Leipzig 1937-1961, which I integrated

The data presented in tables 1 and 2 are referred to the years comprised between the date of beginning of the parish registers and 1562 (Council of Trent ended the following year). The period is different for each community: in fact, I preferred to increase the samples instead of safeguarding their perfect chronological coherence. In any case, this does not represent much of a problem, given that in the first half of XVIth Century traditional godparenthood models had already consolidated and had been stable for a long time. Lastly, it must be observed that the data I present here are not subdivided on the basis of the gender of the babies, nor on the basis of their social status. In fact, a thorough analysis of the data revealed that these factors exerted little influence on the number of godparents given to each child⁶. The widespread belief that only high-born babies had many godfathers and/or godmothers turned out to be a prejudice, as the belief that girls had more godmothers than boys, and vice versa for godfathers. In any case, I shall not develop here a differential analysis based on gender, while I shall return to status later in the article⁷.

with my own estimates. *Turin, Ivrea and Azeaglio*, in Piedmont, were part of the Duchy of Savoy; Turin became its capital in 1560. The city had 14.244 inhabitants in 1571, soared to 24.410 about 1612. Such an impressive demographic and urbanistic growth was due to the relocation in the city of the court of the dukes of Savoy, that until 1560 had been placed in Chambéry. In the same period, the population of Ivrea increased from 3.031 to 4.467, however remaining far from a maximum of 5.300 that can be estimated for year 1377 (in the same year, Turin would have had only 3.500 inhabitants). In general, XVIth Century was a bad period for Ivrea both from a demographic and economic point of view, because of the damage it suffered during the Wars of Italy (1494-1559). For Azeaglio, a small village in the county of Ivrea, I estimated a population of about 850 at the middle of XVIth Century. *Voghera and Bellano*, in Lombardy, were part of the Duchy of Milan and shared its destiny (the Duchy became a contested territory between France and Empire, and at end of the Wars of Italy remained a Spanish possession). Voghera, feud of the Dal Verme family until the end of XVIth Century, had about 7.000 inhabitants around 1576: this estimate, that I elaborated myself starting from the number of baptisms celebrated in the city around that year, is much higher than existing others (Beloch suggests only 1.600). I also estimated a population of about 3.800 around 1550. Bellano, a small village placed on the shores of Como lake, had about 600 inhabitants in 1576. *Finale*, in Liguria, was an imperial feud held by Del Carretto family, and as such was a long-lasting problem for the Republic of Genoa, that managed to absorb it only in 1713. In XVIth Century Finale was divided in three settlements: Finalborgo, Finale Marina and Finale Pia. Unfortunately we have some demographic information only for Final Borgo, that would have had 2.000 inhabitants about 1500. *Mirandola*, in Emilia, was «capital» of the homonymous county, owned by Pico family. The little county became a duchy in 1617. I estimated for Mirandola a population of 3.200 about 1550. *Gambellara*, in Veneto, is a small rural village near Vicenza. I estimated a population of 680 about 1550. It is apparent that, to well understand the reasons that induced to prefer a godfather instead of another it would be important to know which families composed the local *élite*, which were their relationships, which were the fractures inside the communities and so on. For example, two of the communities I studied hosted a court: Mirandola and Turin (from 1560). Close examination of the registers revealed that the Pico family in the first one, and members of the Savoyard court in the second, had a particularly intense activity as godfathers. See ALFANI, G.: *Padri, padrini, patroni*, Op. cit., for further details.

6 It is probable that the belief that girls had more godmothers than boys, and boys more godfathers than girls, has originated from a widespread French model of godparenthood, prescribing the presence at baptisms of two godfathers and one godmother for boys, vice versa for girls. This model is notorious in the literature thanks to the book of CORBLET, J.: *Historie du sacrement de Baptême*, Paris, 1881-1882.

7 The following sources have been used to elaborate the data presented in table 1 and 2, as well as in the graphs and tables that will be presented later: for Ivrea, I worked on four registers of S. Ulderico par-

On the basis of the data presented, it is clear that, on the eve of the Council of Trent, there was a great variety of different local models of godparenthood in Northern Italy. Three variables, in particular, seem to be determinant in defining the characteristics of each model:

1) The number of godfathers. In some places (Bellano, Ivrea, Turin, Azeglio, Voghera) godfathers were very numerous, sometimes more than 20. In Bellano, for example, godfathers were 2,86 per baptism on average, but in 6,27% of baptisms there were more than 5. In other places instead they were few: in Gambellara and Mirandola normally there was only one per baptism⁸.

2) The presence or absence of godmothers. The most important thing here is not to count them but to simply check whether they were present or not at baptisms. Not always a large number of godfathers was coupled with many godmothers: even when godfathers were abundant, it was possible that godmothers were rare (as in Turin) or completely absent (as in Voghera).

3) The existence of a limit to the maximum acceptable number of godfathers. Even where godfathers were abundant, there was sometimes an unsurpassable threshold. For example, in Ivrea and Bellano it was relatively common to give to children 5 or more godfathers, but in Voghera I never found more than 5 of them among the 4.082 baptisms considered, and only in 2% of cases I found 4 or 5. The concept of «acceptable number» of godfathers must be thought in terms of «social acceptability»: it was, or was not, socially legitimate to choose a certain number of godfathers. In any case, it is possible that, in some places, rules prescribed by the local ecclesiastical institutions played a role in containing the number of godparents: it is well known that the Church

ish, relative to years 1473-1505, 1524-1585, 1586-1610 and 1587-1800 (the last register contains the original information relative to years 1611-1800, plus copy of the baptisms celebrated in 1586-1610. Parish Archive of Ivrea Cathedral). For years 1506-1523 no registration is available. For Azeglio, I used the most ancient parish register, relative to years 1543-1599, followed by a long gap in the registrations (Parish Archive of Azeglio). For Turin, I used a register of S. Agostino parish, relative to years 1551-1617 (Parish Archive of S. Agostino of Turin). For Bellano, I worked on a register of S. S. Giorgio, Nazaro and Celso parish, relative to years 1533-1639 (Parish Archive of Bellano). For Voghera, I used four registers of S. Lorenzo parish (Duomo), relative to years 1534-1566, 1534-1570, 1567-1591 and 1592-1621 (Duomo Archive of Voghera). For Finale Ligure, I used two registers of S. Maria parish, attached to Finalpia Abbey, relative to years 1481-1592 and 1593-1644 (Archive of the Abbey of Finalpia). For Gambellara I used six registers of S. Pietro Apostolo parish, relative to years 1541-1554, 1555-1564, 1564-1579, 1592-1609, 1609-1617 and 1617-1699 (Archive of the Diocese of Vicenza). For Mirandola, I worked on seven registers of S. Maria Maggiore (Duomo) parish, relative to years 1484-1521, 1521-1556, 1556-1568, 1568-1575, 1575-1586, 1587-1599 and 1600-1613 (Archive of the Duomo of Mirandola).

8 Looking at single baptisms, the ceremonies with the largest number of godparents took place in Ivrea. The most striking case is that of Maria, daughter of Bernardo Salti from Chiaverano and niece of Pietro Salti, that on 20th March 1502 was baptised in S. Ulderico parish at the presence of 17 godfathers and 10 godmothers. However, considering only godfathers, I found a maximum of 21 (2 cases), while for godmothers is 10 (2 cases, one being the already mentioned Maria Salti).

Tab. 1. Average number of godfathers in Northern Italy (until 1562)

Godfathers per baptism (%)	Bellano	Ivrea	Turin	Azeglio	Voghera	Finale	Gambellara	Mirandola
0	1,74	0,93	6,48	0,51	0,37	1,74	1,23	0,46
1	14,81	27,09	20,37	18,87	10,16	43,44	63,32	85,36
2	31,18	34,52	30,56	32,08	62,99	51,02	30,51	13,16
3	27,87	18,51	17,59	46,83	24,33	3,48	4,41	0,90
4	11,67	8,29	16,67	1,20	1,98	0,31	0,53	0,11
5	6,45	5,07	6,49	0,17	0,17	0	0	0,04
>5	6,27	5,57	1,85	0,17	0	0	0	0,02
Average number of godfathers	2,86	2,55	2,44	2,34	2,18	1,57	1,4	1,15
Number of baptisms	574	1399	108	583	4085	976	567	8449
Date of beginning of parish registers	1533	1473	1551	1543	1534	1481	1541	1484

Tab. 2. Average number of godmothers in Northern Italy (until 1562)

Godmothers per baptism (%)	Bellano	Ivrea	Turin	Azeglio	Voghera	Finale	Gambellara	Mirandola
0	3,31	27,49	81,48	2,40	99,83	3,89	1,59	1,04
1	35,37	37,69	7,41	52,83	0,17	46,21	64,73	79,85
2	21,78	22,66	5,56	31,90	0	45,9	28,4	17,96
3	18,99	7,72	0	12,35	0	3,89	5,31	1,12
4	10,63	2,79	3,7	0,51	0	0,1	0,18	0,06
5	5,92	1,14	1,85	0	0	0	0	0,01
>5	4,01	0,57	0	0	0	0	0	0
Average number of godmothers	2,35	1,27	0,43	1,60	0	1,5	1,38	1,19
Number of baptisms	574	1399	108	583	4085	976	567	8449
Date of beginning of parish registers	1533	1473	1551	1543	1534	1481	1541	1484

tried to regulate godparenthood well before the Council of Trent. However, I did not find any trace of this kind of rules in the communities I studied⁹.

The mix of these three variables allows us to elaborate a typology of models, that can be used in analyzing the distribution of customs on the territory. The result

9 The Church had tried since ancient times to moderate the number of godparents present at baptism. The most ancient prescription in this sense I know of comes from the Council of Metz (893), that tried to impose a single godparent, be it a godfather or a godmother. Such prescriptions were often repeated in the following centuries, but probably never applied in an effective way. On this subject, see ALFANI, G.: «Dalle pratiche alla norma: il Concilio di Trento e la riforma del padrino in una prospettiva di lungo periodo», *Società e Storia*, CVIII, 2005, pp. 31-62, and LYNCH, J. H.: *Godparents and kinship in Early Medieval Europe*, Princeton, 1986.

is a very complex map, however not without noticeable tendencies that open up interesting perspectives for a (broken) «geography of customs»¹⁰.

For the sake of simplicity, I shall not develop here the questions, both of a technical and theoretical nature, raised by the elaboration of my typology and by its use in the direction of a geography of customs. Rather I shall limit myself to giving some more information about godparenthood customs found in Italy, and to offer some considerations of a descriptive kind about their distribution.

Apart from my own data, information about pre-tridentine Italian models of godparenthood can be found for very few areas. Starting from the North and going southward, the first area to be considered is the Republic of Venice (to which Gambellara belonged). In the capital, the big city of Venice, it seems that godparents were many: at least in families of the nobility, 20 godfathers and more were not unusual, up to about 100. In Verona and Vicenza, children of the *élites* normally had two godfathers and sometimes more, but never exceeding a maximum of 5. Godmothers were present in less than 1/3 of baptisms. For Treviso, sample studies not restricted to the *élites* revealed a similar situation. In the village of Santorso, in the countryside of Vicenza, a lot of godfathers and godmothers were customary: the model is very similar to that found in Bellano (Lombardy, Duchy of Milan) and Ivrea (Piedmont, Duchy of Savoy). I underline the fact that inside the Republic of Venice the customs changed: the political boundaries, in the case of godparenthood at least, seem to have had very little influence on customs¹¹.

A second area for which we have some data is the Duchy of Tuscany, in central-western Italy. In Florence, in particular, godfathers were many: in 50% of baptisms there were three at least, but in 2,5% they were more than 10. Normally (73% of baptisms) godmothers were absent, and when they were present, they were fewer than godfathers. The Florentine model is striking for being totally analogous to that found in Turin (Piedmont, Duchy of Savoy)¹².

10 For a theoretic framing of «geography of customs», see LE ROY LADURIE, E.: «Système de la coutume. Structures familiales et coutumes d'héritage», *Annales E.S.C.*, july-october 1972, pp. 825-846.

11 For Verona and Vicenza, GRUBB, J. S.: *Provincial Families of the Renaissance: Private and Public Life in the Veneto*, Baltimore, 1996. For Venice, CORBLET, J.: *Histoire du sacrement de Baptême*, Op. cit., but given the source Corblet himself refers to (*Mercure de France*, march 1725), the attendibility of his data for Venice should be checked. For Santorso, I used a sample of 117 baptisms celebrated in the years 1538-1540, collected by myself (Archivio Diocesano di Vicenza, Registro dei battesimi di Santorso, 1536-1565). For Treviso, I use unpublished data, courtesy of Matthieu Scherman.

12 The data about Florence comes from KLAPISH-ZUBER, who collected many texts on the subject in *La maison et le nom. Stratégies et rituels dans l'Italie de la Renaissance*, Paris, 1990. For Florentine godparenthood practices, see also HAAS, L.: «Social connections between parents and god-parents», *Medieval prosopography*, X, 1989, and «Il mio buon compare: Choosing Godparents and the Uses of Baptismal Kinship in Renaissance Florence», *Journal of Social History*, XXIX, 1995-1996, pp. 341-356.

In Southern Italy, at that time fully part of the Kingdom of Naples, the only data available concerns the rural town of Manduria (Puglia) and some villages in hilly areas around Salerno (Campania). In the former, it was customary to give children two godfathers and no godmothers. In the latter ones, one godmother was always present, while a godfather was present only rarely, with a clear preference for babies of the upper classes. Both kinds of model, and particularly the second, are very different from those I found in Northern Italy and have no analogies with others I know of¹³.

Looking at the distribution on the Italian territory of the models of godparenthood, one could be puzzled by the apparent lack of coherence. I have already noted that political boundaries did not seemingly influence them; I can add that neither did religious and institutional boundaries such as those of the diocese, at least not in the areas where I was able to make extensive checks, such as the dioceses of Ivrea or Vicenza.

Nevertheless, some trends can be discerned. First of all, the number of godparents seems to increase going northward along the Italian peninsula: the very few godparents typical of southern Italy customary models have no known match in central or northern Italy. Focusing on the latter, where the available data are much more dense, it is possible to distinguish between two areas:

- 1) the semicircular strip of land at the foot of the Alps, where all «pure multi-godparents» models (i.e. many godfathers and many godmothers, without clear limits to their numbers) I found were concentrated;
- 2) the core of the Po valley, extending between Alps and Apennines towards the Adriatic sea, where there usually was a clear limit to the maximum admissible number of godparents.

This distribution of the models clearly suggests the hypothesis of rules of moderation (of a positive, or «customary» nature?), spreading from a core towards more isolated areas. Such a hypothesis, however, would require much more data than currently available in order to be verified.

What was the situation in the rest of Europe? Obviously, it is not possible here to discuss the matter in depth, for reasons both of space and of relative lack of information. I shall limit myself to offering some considerations for Western and Central European countries, useful to start defining a broader picture, the details of which still need to be investigated¹⁴.

13 DELILLE, G.: *Famille et propriété dans le Royaume de Naples (XV-XIX siècles)*, Rome-Paris, 1985.

14 For more information, see ALFANI, G.: *Padri, padrini, patroni*, Op. cit. and «E pluribus unum: forme di padrinnaggio nell'Italia moderna a cavallo del Concilio di Trento», *Quaderni Storici*, CXIV, 2003, pp. 823-848

As far as England and France are concerned, there is a widespread belief that, starting from the Middle Ages, a particular godparenthood model prevailed which prescribed two godfathers and one godmother for males and two godmothers and one godfather for females. However, this belief probably needs correction, considering that some studies have revealed the existence of many different local rules and of different local customs. In particular, some cases are known of the application of pure multi-godparents models. The «ternary» model that is thought to have prevailed in England and France is attested also in Holland and Denmark. In Spain, some regulatory effort suggest that the custom of giving many godfathers and godmothers was widespread. In the case of Germany and of other Reformed countries very little data is available for the period but nevertheless it is reasonable to think that the multi-godfathers customs were widespread. Indeed, in many places such customs have survived until today¹⁵.

In general, the few data available for European countries suggest that it would be wise to resist any temptation to make broad generalizations. My impression is that a deeper look would reveal a situation similar to that found in Italy, i.e. an extremely complex distribution of different customs (combined, at least in the case of France, with a complex distribution of more or less well respected pre-Tridentine positive rules). In this field, further research is surely needed.

Up to now, I have put much stress on the number of godfathers and godmother present at baptisms. This could, however, raise two questions. First of all, how can we say

15 About France, a different rule from that prescribing two godfathers and one godmother for males and vice versa for females was found in Cambrai, where a synod dating back to 1550 had to officially accept two godfathers and two godmothers per baptism, acknowledging in this way pressures coming from the community, see CHAUNU, P.: *Les Temps des Réformes*, Paris 1975. On the other hand at Porrentruy, on the border between France and the Swiss canton of Jura, well before the Council of Trent the «couple model» (one godfather and one godmother for each baby) was prevalent, PEGEOT, P.: «Un exemple de parenté baptismale à la fin du Moyen Age. Porrentruy 1482-1500», in *Les entrées dans la vie. Initiations et apprentissages*, Nancy, 1982. An example of French multi-godparents models is that of Joan of Arc, who seemingly had 4 godfathers and 5 godmothers (but the matter is somewhat controversial), JUSSEN, B.: «Le parrainage à la fin du Moyen-âge: savoir public, attentes théologiques et usages sociaux», *Annales E.S.C.*, mars-avril 1992, pp. 467-502. For Holland, see MARSHALL, S.: *The Dutch gentry, 1500-1650*, New York, 1987. About Spanish regulations and customs, see what noted by FOSTER G. M.: «Cofradia and compadrazgo in Spain and Spanish America», *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, IX, 1953, pp. 1-28, concerning an edict of the Order of Santiago of 1440. Lastly, in the case of Germany it must be noted that Catholic reform of godparenthood was largely due to Reformed criticism. Luther, in fact, condemned the impediments to marriage coming from spiritual kinship and *de facto* abolished spiritual kinship itself, stating that godparents were only to be considered as witnesses of baptism and tutors of the religious education of children. In this way, he solved all problems posed by the notion of «spiritual incest»: as a result, the number of godfathers ceased to be a relevant issue. See ALFANI, G.: *Dalle pratiche alla norma*, Op. cit. and Id., «Geistige Allianzen: Patenschaft als Instrument sozialer Beziehung in Italien und Europa (15. bis 20. Jahrhundert)», in LANZINGUER, M. and SAURER, E. (eds.): *Politiken der Verwandtschaft*, Göttingen, 2007, pp. 25-54.

that two places have different models of godparenthood, limiting ourselves to considering the number of godparents? And secondly, what would be the relevance of it?

Answers to these questions are strictly interwoven. It must be clearly stated that the number of godfathers and godmothers admissible at baptism is a fundamental characteristic of local godparenthood models, so that, if it changes from one place to another, we can undoubtedly say that their respective model is substantially different. The possibility of choosing a bigger or smaller group of godfathers and godmothers influenced in a determinant way the strategies of selection that could be pursued: I will soon develop the matter further, while analyzing the changing in criteria of selection before and after the Council of Trent. To answer the question about the relevance, it is necessary to think about the fact that spiritual kinship was instrumental in building a dense network of social ties, interconnected with the networks based on ties of «natural» kinship, friendship, neighbourhood and so on. In particular, where it was possible to choose a large number of godfathers and godmothers, the spiritual kinship network had extremely complex characteristics, so that it is not always easy to discern which kind of tie effectively a spiritual kinship tie was. As will be seen, where it was possible to choose many godparents, I found a tendency to choose them from each rank of the local society, so that the «practical» relevance of each resulting tie was evidently different from one case to another.

The above reference to «networks» and «social ties» would inevitably seem vague, without some deeper reflections on the role played by godparenthood and spiritual kinship during Modern Age. I will proceed to this task briefly, before analyzing the transformations induced by the Council of Trent.

In an article that had a founding role for the «history of godparenthood» itself, the anthropologists Sidney W. Mintz and Eric R. Wolf underlined one fundamental and exceptional characteristic of godparenthood as a social institution: its flexibility, i.e. its ability to contribute, in a coherent and lasting manner, to the working of sociability models neatly different one from the other¹⁶.

The concept of «flexibility» maintained a prominent importance in anthropological studies conducted on godparenthood in the following decades. However, to a certain extent its heuristic reach was unvoluntarily limited: the analysis of each local model of godparenthood ended up being orderly classified in a conceptual schema, built up starting from a small number of pairs of opposed variables (dichotomies),

16 «The outstanding characteristic of the compadre mechanism is its adaptiveness to different situations. As the structure of the situation changes, so we may see the compadre mechanism serve different purposes». MINTZ and WOLF: «An Analysis of Ritual Co-Parenthood (compadrazgo)», *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, VI, 1950, pp. 347.

whose relative importance changed from one model to the other (extension/intensification of blood kinship, horizontality/verticality of the social tie, etc.)¹⁷.

My data suggest instead a much more complex situation. First, they reveal that the flexibility of godparenthood showed itself not only in the kinds of social relationships it generated, but also in the number of those relationships: until it was possible to ignore ecclesiastical laws aimed at imposing some limits, each community seems to have adhered to rules different from those of other communities, regarding the maximum admissible number of godfathers, the presence or absence of godmothers, the proportion between godfathers and godmothers, the legitimacy of choosing members of the clergy as godfathers and so on¹⁸. The origin of these rules is very hard to find and interpret: probably a progressive and stratified mix of influences absorbed from points of diffusion of practices placed at variable distances, local «inventions», moderation efforts put in place by local ecclesiastical institutions. Characteristics and historic development of the mix changes from place to place.

Secondly, the dichotomic approach above mentioned risks to be misleading, especially in the case of those communities where godparents were abundant, because it suggests the *prevalence* of a certain way of selecting godparents, while instead a typical and unique characteristic of godparenthood was to allow the elaboration of strategies aimed at the *co presence* of many principles of selection, thus inducing to prefer groups of godfathers and godmothers very heterogeneous in their composition.

A further clarification of the «measure» of the flexibility of godparenthood is needed. The crucial point is the following: even if godparenthood is a social institution regulated by customs that can be reconducted to long-run perspectives, «à la Braudel», nevertheless it leaves open important spaces for improvisation and unique and non-repeated behaviours. Another strong point of this «weak» tie is its ability to be always at hand for answering particular and exceptional needs, when there are not ready and consolidated customary rules prescribing how to act. In general, godparenthood *can* be the catalyst of potentialities often not expressed, not all at the same time, not everywhere. In the words of D.W. Sabeau, «ritual kinship always has something potential about it, but most crucially it keeps open a permanent line of communication»¹⁹.

17 For a synthesis of the evolution of anthropological studies on godparenthood, see LYNCH, *Godparents and kinship*, Op. cit.

18 I dedicated two articles to clergy and women acting as godparents, ALFANI, G.: «La famille spirituelle des prêtres en Italie septentrionale avant et après le Concile de Trente: caractéristiques et transformations d'un instrument d'intégration sociale», *Annales de Démographie Historique*, 1, 2004, pp. 137-161; Id., «Les réseaux de marrainage en Italie du Nord du XVe au XVIIe siècle: coutumes, évolution, parcours individuels», *Histoire, Économie et Société*, 4, 2006, pp. 17-44.

19 SABEAN, D.: *Kinship in Neckarhausen*, Op. cit., p. 239. For the concept of «longue durée» as developed by BRAUDEL, F.: *La Méditerranée*, Paris, 1949.

I think that, besides pure potentialities, godparenthood has important elements of concrete and continuous social relevance, more than Sabeau seems to think (but his words are referred to a different area, epoch and religion). Nevertheless, the crucial element is the «permanent line of communication» assured by godparenthood. Actually, improvisation and unique behaviours are relevant not only regarding the selection of godparents: in fact, the creation of a tie of spiritual kinship, weak also in the sense of «little characterized», allows to resort to it when a need arises, or rather when it is necessary to give an answer to unusual and unforeseen situations and exigencies.

In the light of what has just been noted, the «broken» geography of godparenthood customs found in Italy at the eve of the Council of Trent and probably common to the whole of Europe, leads us to consider from an unusual perspective the structure of Early Modern Age societies. Surely in the Italian case, the fragmentation of these and other important social customs reflected a general fragmentation not limited to social aspects, but also present at the economic, cultural and political levels. From this point of view, fragmentation should not be considered «an accident» or «a problem» (as the political fragmentation of XVIth Century Italy has surely been declared), but a fundamental characteristic of how people used to group and interact at the time. Even if the matter can not be discussed further here, it should be kept in mind while considering the transformations induced by the Council of Trent.

3. The application of Tridentine Law. Paths of adaptation and attempts at resistance

On the basis of the data presented, it is undoubtable that, before the Council of Trent, in Italy and in the rest of Europe many different «models» of godparenthood were widespread, implicating at the level of the communities differences in the structure of social networks.

The Council of Trent represents a fundamental breaking point in the history of godparenthood as a social institution, and one that up to now has been largely neglected by literature. After long and animated discussions, at which advocates of traditional customs were not lacking, the Council decided to deeply reform such institution, probably without really understanding what would have been the social consequences of an intervention of this kind. The Council acted on two fronts: the extension of the ties of spiritual kinship and of the relative impediments to marriage, and the admissible number of godfathers and godmothers.

About the first point, it must be noted that, up to that time, spiritual kinship ties extended well beyond the group of godfathers and godmothers on one side, child and his parents on the other: in fact, also the spouses of godparents and their children

were involved. The Council, wanting to reduce the occurrence of spiritual incest, at the time quite widespread and harbinger of scandal, stated that spiritual kinship existed only between godfathers and godmothers on one side, parents of the baptised child on the other; between the child and his godfathers and godmothers; between the child and who baptised him. In any case, it was possible to request a dispensation in order to get married even when a tie of spiritual kinship existed; in this way, the latter was juridically equalized to natural kinship.

About the admissible number of godparents, the Council stated that only one godparent was enough, be it male or female, but as a maximum two of different gender were acceptable: one godfather and one godmother.

These decisions, and the second one in particular, caused the crisis of those traditional models of godparenthood based on the abundance of godfathers and godmothers. The complex social networks based on spiritual kinship ties had to shrink, reducing themselves to much simpler structures, generally very different, from a qualitative point of view, from the original one²⁰.

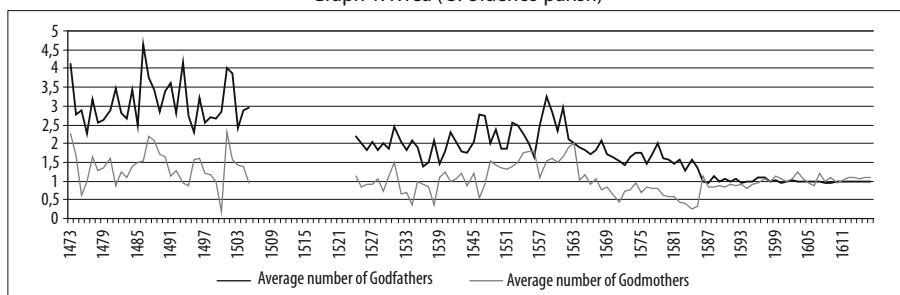
According to places, the adaptation to Tridentine law was gradual and uncertain for a long time, or extremely fast. Where the local model of godparenthood was similar to the couple model, such as in Finale Ligure or Mirandola, the change seemed less rude and, probably, aroused less complaints. Where instead it was customary that many godfathers and godmothers took part at each baptism, evidence suggests a situation of bewilderment, of hostility to the reform, of continuous negotiation aimed at softening its effects. The attempts at resistance made by these populations offer interesting and revealing perspectives from which to observe godparenthood. I shall focus myself here on the four communities presenting the most interesting paths of adaptation (Ivrea, Gambellara, Torino, Voghera), using, as an instrument of analysis, graphs representing the average number of godfathers and godmothers per year²¹.

Ivrea (graph 1) is exemplary of places where application of the new Tridentine law was not immediate, but gradual and caused much confusion to a population stubbornly attached to his own ancient customs. Between 1563 and 1586, we notice a progressive decline in the average number of godfathers and godmothers that

20 ALFANI, G.: *Padri, padrini, patroni*, Op. cit.

21 In the literature is widespread the belief that, for a long time after the Council of Trent, European populations could go on with their own godparenthood customs, ignoring the canons: see, for example, BOSSY, J.: *Christianity in the west 1400-1700*, Oxford, 1985. As far as Northern Italy is concerned, this belief is wrong: even the communities most hostile to Tridentine reform had to yield before 1590. About the graphs, note that each of them is based on a yearly number of baptisms sufficient to guarantee that general trends be not heavily distorted by casual fluctuations. In the case of S. Ulderico parish of Ivrea, in the period considered an average of 21 baptisms per year was celebrated; in S. Pietro of Gambellara 28; in S. Agostino of Turin 23; in S. Lorenzo of Voghera 176.

Graph 1. Ivrea (S. Ulderico parish)



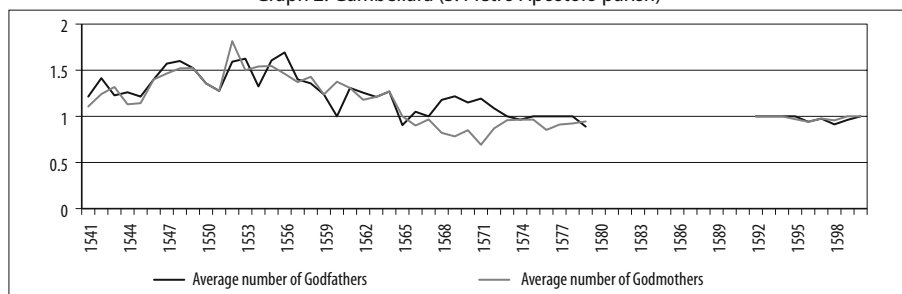
approaches the value «1» in the case of godfathers, while in the case of godmothers drops well below: in this period, at many baptisms no godmothers were present. The trend of the curves suggests the hypothesis that at Ivrea the new law was imposed through a sort of continuous «negotiation» between the clergy and a population that little understood the reasons for the change and even worst accepted them. From case to case, the priest would have reached an agreement with the baby's parents, in order to limit the total number of godfathers and godmothers. In particular, renouncing to the godmother would have made it possible to obtain a second godfather. After 1586, date from which we can assume that, at last, the population had been «disciplined», it seems that godmothers were re-discovered: their role became more important, because it was no longer possible to choose many godfathers²².

22 About these paths of adaptation, some further consideration is necessary. First of all, it is important to note that, in the case of Northern Italy, a delay in the application of the decisions taken by the Council of Trent can not be explained with the unwillingness of territorial States to adopt them. Actually, in Italy acceptance of what stated by the Council was almost immediate: normally a formal adhesion came before the end of 1564, but representatives sent to Trent by Duches of Savoy and Tuscany and by Republic of Venice had already given it, in written form, 6th December 1563. Anyway, papal bull *Benedictus Deus et Pater* (with which Pio IV rated and enacted Council decrees) is dated 26th January 1564, but was published only 5 months later. At that point, Italian bishops were very fast in summoning provincial and diocesan synods, aimed at promoting the application of the canons on the territories subjected to their authority. See MICHEL, A.: «Trente (concile de)», in Vacant, Mangelot and Amann (eds.), *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*. Secondly, it must be noted that the transformation visible in the graphs can not be attributed to the alternating of priests more or less observant of Tridentine law, or more or less precise in registering baptisms. For example, in the case of S. Ulderico parish of Ivrea, and limiting the analysis to the crucial years 1563 and 1586, it results that in 1563 registers were kept by Antonio Robesto, that had accomplished such task since 1558 and would have done up to April 1586. In the almost 20 years between, the average number of godparents dropped from 3,19 in 1558 to 1,37 in 1585 (the last year during which the registers were of Robesto exclusive competence). An analogous trend can be observed for godmothers. It is apparent that, unless hypothesizing an improbable growing lack of care in the kept of registers, the drop in the series reflects a real changing in the behaviours. In the following years, after a very short period during which registers were kept by Michele Cherico from Lugnacco, at the end of April 1586 the incumbence was given to Cristoforo Clerici. Indeed it is probable that, this time, the handing over of the parish to a new

Something similar to Ivrea happened in Gambellara (graph 2). After a momentary acceptance of the law (from August 1564 up to the whole of 1566), the local population developed a strategy of resistance: the average number of godfathers went again above the value «1», while the average number of godmothers dropped below. This phenomenon lasted 8 years, from 1567 to 1574. Analysing in depth the data, I found that the total number of godparents never exceeded 2: as a matter of fact, the godmother was replaced with an additional godfather (29 cases during the period, amounting to 14,4% of all baptisms) or, much rarely, happened the contrary (6 cases).

It is evident that, in order to be able to act in this way, Gambellara population had to have at its disposal an accomodating priest, or maybe it had means of constraining him to reach a compromise. In the case of Gambellara, the exchange «one godmother for one more godfather» hypothesised for Ivrea is so evident, that there are few doubts that some sort of negotiation, concerning the ways of application of the new law, actually took place. The fact that the reaction was not immediate, but had a little delay, represents further supporting evidence, because it suggests that Gambellara people waited for the situation to cool down before acting, aiming, if not at returning to the original situation, at least at mitigating the most unpleasant effects of the reform. The resulting violation of canon law, when discovered, was aptly broken off, because between 1575 and 1629 in no baptism did I find more than one godfather.

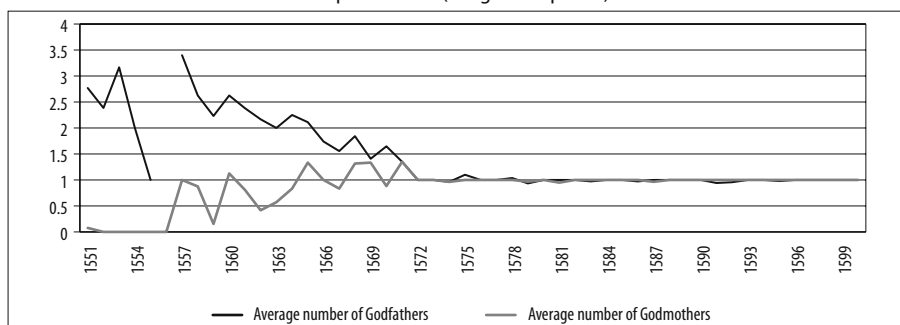
Graph 2. Gambellara (S. Pietro Apostolo parish)



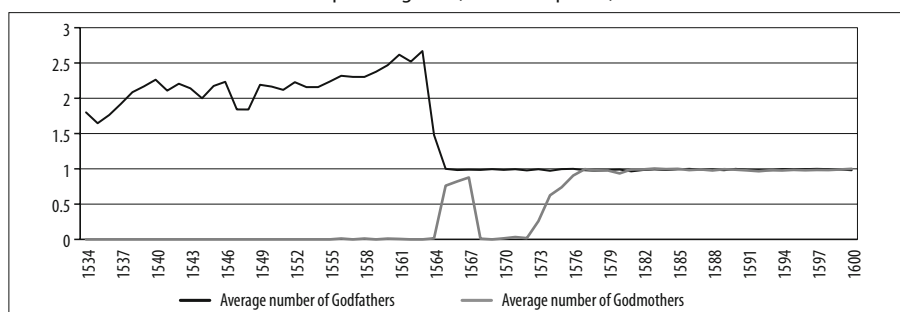
Also at Turin (graph 3) we find a period of adaptation, but a short one: already in 1572 the disciplining was completed. The drastic reduction in number of godfathers was an occasion for «discovering» godmothers: they became a constant presence at baptisms, while before they attended only one each five.

priest exerted an influence on registrations, in the sense that it ended a phase of contrast and negotiation between population and clergy. The new priest, finding a weakened resistance (graph 1 is revealing) without hope for the future, manages to impose full respect of Tridentine law concernig godparents.

Graph 3. Torino (S. Agostino parish)



Graph 4. Voghera (S. Lorenzo parish)



At Voghera (graph 4) the reduction of the number of godfathers is immediate and quite sharp: already in 1565 the new law had been imposed. Godmothers are a different matter. In Voghera, they were practically unknown before the Council of Trent and, as in Turin, the new law was occasion for tailoring a role for them: already in 1565 they were present at almost every baptism. Nevertheless, after just three years of experimenting, godmothers surprisingly disappeared again. They came back only in 1573, to become forever a presence at baptisms. Considering such occurrences, surely the first hypothesis to consider is scarce accuracy in keeping baptismal registers. However, such hypothesis has to be rejected, due to the excellent quality of Voghera registers, for many years drawn up in two copies. Deep analysis of the evidence suggests a different explanation, starting from the apparent confusion made by the people of Voghera when they tried to identify a role for godmothers as something different from midwives. For the sake of brevity, I shall not further discuss here the case. I shall limit myself to noting that these signs of confusion between godmothers and midwives not only reveal a general, widespread uncertainty about the role of midwives at baptism, but also point at the state of confusion in which the city itself falls after the Council. The reduction of godfathers is so fast that an important network of social ties is abruptly destroyed, and the efforts at mending it through the «invention» of godmothers are uncertain and unsure, so that

after a first try they are dropped. The impression is that of a society looking for a new equilibrium, and that does not know in which direction it would be better to move²³.

Examining the graphs, it clearly results that, already at the end of XVI Century, in Northern Italy the «couple model» was firmly established; this conclusion is confirmed by evidence relative to every community I studied. The implications of this changing, as well as its conformity to the will of the Council of Trent, are the subjects of next paragraph.

4. After the Council: the unexpected results of a Tridentine reform

Considered the nature of godparenthood as a social institution during Early Modern Age, it is indubitable that the change it underwent, from the many pre-Tridentine models to the couple model, introduced an unprecedented element of rigidity. The possible variations of local models were drastically reduced in number and extent, given the much stricter limits that each of them had to respect. At the same time, there was a reduction in the ways in which godparenthood could concur to determine the social structure and the paths of sociability of each community. This effect was obtained through «snatching» godparenthood from the realm of customs and practices, to project in that of written laws, uniform and universally binding for Roman Catholic populations. This process seems to fit well in a bigger picture, drawn up by John Bossy: Counter-Reformation would have imposed «parish conformism» to a Church that, up to that moment, would have been a conglomerate of autonomous communities²⁴.

This transition from customs to written law, and from many customary models to a single one, had at least two further implications worth considering. First, it had a different social impact from place to place: where customs were the most different from the new laws, we find the most striking signs of uncertainty and of attempts at resistance. These differences in the intensity of the social impact, that could probably be found also for other Tridentine reforms, generated in Catholic Europe imbalances and tensions whose nature and extent are very difficult to grasp.

Secondly, and despite what has just been noted, if it is not possible to declare that after the Council of Trent there was only one model of godparenthood (because many aspects of this social institution may vary, even when respecting the «form» of the couple model), nevertheless it is very probable that the reform exerted a force in the direction of the uniformation of societies, at least in the short run. In the second

23 I analyze in detail the case of Voghera in ALFANI, G.: *Padri, padrini, patroni*, Op. cit.

24 BOSSY, J.: «The Counter-Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe», *Past and Present*, XLVII, 1970.

half of XVIth Century, all or almost all the communities of Northern Italy moved some paces in the same direction. Unfortunately for the Church, however, this direction was not the one it wished.

As already noted, the Council of Trent stated that one godparent, be it male or female, was enough: it is clear, from the wording of the canon and the discussions from whom it originated, that this was the solution the Council aimed at imposing. Establishing a maximum of two godparents, one per gender, was a sort of concession to the advocates of customary «multi-godfathers» models. So, a first insuccess of Tridentine reform can be clearly seen in the almost universal adoption of the couple model, even where it was not customary to give children any godmother, as in Turin or Voghera²⁵.

Much more important was, to the Church, the failure of another part of the planned reform of godparenthood. The Council knew well that godparents were not chosen by baby's parents keeping in mind what should have been their role, i.e the tutoring of their godchildren during their Christian education. Instead, the Council felt that godparents were chosen to maximise the advantages (of economic or social nature) they could bring. As part of the reform of godparenthood, the Council planned to induce godparents to effectively accomplish their duties.

The Council well knew the difficulties implied in such a project. In any case, at least it identified a necessary condition: parents should have been induced to choose for their children godfathers and godmothers of their own social level, because only in this way was it conceivable that they would really act as tutors. This implied discouraging the choice of rich and powerful godparents, aimed at maximizing material benefits. The Council however did not emanate a positive rule prohibiting such a line of conduct, maybe realizing that it would have been impossible to burden priests with the necessary checks. Nevertheless in the phase of application of Tridentine canons there were some who tried: such is the case of Carlo Borromeo, archbishop of the important diocese of Milan²⁶.

25 The Tridentine canon of reform of godparenthood and spiritual kinship is the following: «*Docet experientia, propter multitudinem prohibitorum multoties in casibus prohibitis ignoranter contrahi matrimonia, in quibus vel non sine magno peccato perseveratur; vel ea non sine magno scandalo dirimuntur. Volens itaque sancta synodus huic incommodo providere, et a cognationis spiritualis impedimento incipiens, statuit, ut unus tantum, sive vir sive mulier, iuxta sacrorum canonum instituta, vel ad summum unus et una baptizatum de baptismo suscipiant, inter quos ac baptizatum ipsum et illius patrem et matrem, necnon inter baptizantem et baptizatum baptizatique patrem ac matrem tantum spiritualis cognatio contrahatur*», Societas Goerresiana, *Concilium Tridentinum diariorum, actorum, epistularum tractatum* (in the following : C.T.T.), vol. IX, 969.

26 The widespread custom of choosing rich and powerful godparents had been indicated by the Council as an abuse since the meeting of the Deputation for Reforms, in June-July 1547. C.T.T., Vol. VI, 302-303. The archbishop of Milan, Carlo Borromeo, in his regulations aimed at effectively applying Tridentine reform, included specific rules about that: in the first Provincial Council (october 1565), par-

In the light of what was planned by the Council, it is particularly interesting to pose the question of the social transformation caused by the new reform. This means checking if, and in which way, godparenthood connected different social ranks, before and after the effective adoption of the new law.

Parish registers contain a kind of information that can be used to evaluate, albeit approximately, the relative social ranking of fathers and godfathers: their titles. On this base, I divided the population in four ranks: those who were registered without titles; «Magistri», i.e. masters of the guilds; members of the clergy; «Signori», i.e. all titled people, save for masters and clergymen. Magistri and clergy had special titles reserved only to them, so that they can be easily distinguished from other titled people. It is evident that, inside the «Signori» group, there could be much difference between individuals. However, I find grouping them together a preferable choice, because establishing a hierarchy of all titles would be risky both for the inherent imprecision of some social classification, and for the existence of local titling customs that could cause confusion. For each community, I compared data relative to a decade preceding the Council of Trent with another following (1540-1549 and 1600-1609 respectively).

The comparison revealed interesting facts both about the composition of the groups of godfathers before the Council of Trent, and the later transformations.

About the first point, I shall limit myself to noting that, considering the sample 1540-1549, it results that where it was possible to choose many godfathers, they were selected from every social rank. This is true both for low-born babies, and for high-born ones: even the children of the *élites* had humble godfathers, side by side with powerful ones. Considering the Signori fathers, the percentage of their children's godfathers chosen among the untitled was 64% in Gambellara, 47% in Turin, 25% in Ivrea and 23% in Voghera. Only in Bellano and Mirandola were these percentages much lower (about 5%).

On the base of the evidence, it is clearly impossible to classify pre-Tridentine Italian models of godparenthood as simply «horizontal» or «vertical», according to a dichotomy widespread in the literature. In fact the reality was much more complex: the possibility of choosing many godfathers and godmothers, along with the relative feebleness of a tie of spiritual kinship (in the sense that it was not too much binding for the parties), made it «rational» to establish links at every social level. Where it was socially acceptable to choose many godparents, the principles of a good selection required taking some from the lower ranks, some from the middle and some from the

ish priests were instructed to exhort their flocks not to choose godfathers because of their richness, but to select people who could effectively take care of their godchildren. It is probable that, in the same years, there were many others repeating such admonition. See ALFANI, G.: *Padri, padrini, patroni*, Op. cit., and «L'applicazione del Concilio di Trento sotto la guida di Carlo Borromeo. Un case study: la riforma del padrinato», *Ricerche Storiche sulla Chiesa Ambrosiana*, n. XXIV, 2006, pp. 53-76.

top, or at least trying (the willingness to be godfathers of potential candidates can not be taken for granted). Often a member of the clergy completed the group nicely, at least where local customs allowed them to be godfathers²⁷.

The drastic restriction of the groups of godfathers made old strategies of selection impossible. The social implications of this change are striking. Consider godfathers of Untitled children: everywhere (save Bellano) the percentage of godfathers belonging to their same social rank drops, often abruptly: from 73% to 45% at Voghera, from 30% to 9% at Mirandola, from 86% to 69% at Finale Ligure, from 88% to 62% at Turin, from 58% to 53% at Ivrea, from 88% to 86% at Gambellara. At the same time, the percentage of Signori godfathers soars (again, save Bellano): from 18% to 52% at Voghera, from 64% to 89% at Mirandola, from 5% to 28% at Finale Ligure, from 7% to 37% at Torino, from 20% to 42% at Ivrea, from 7% to 11% at Gambellara.

The contrary happens for Signori children: everywhere the percentage of godfathers of their same social rank soars, the most striking cases being Turin (from 46% to 93%), Gambellara (from 19% to 69%), Ivrea (from 58% to 88%) and Voghera (from 58% to 88%). At the same time, the percentage of Untitled godfathers drops (from 47% to 6% at Turin, from 64% to 31% at Gambellara, from 25% to 8% at Ivrea and from 23% to 2% at Voghera).

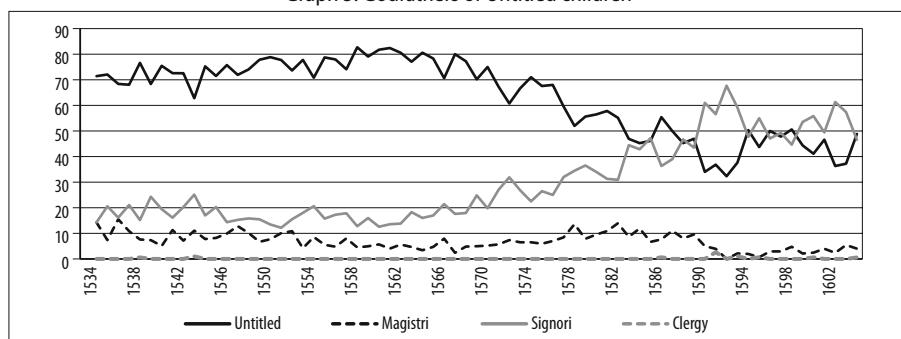
This double trend, of verticalization for the lower social ranks and of horizontalization for the higher, proceeds in parallel with the progressive reduction of the average number of godparents during the phase of application of the new law. This process is clearly visible in graphs 5 and 6, where annual series of the proportions of godfathers of each rank are represented, respectively for Untitled children and Signori children from Voghera.

On the basis of the graphs, it is possible to state that, at the end of XVIth Century, the phase of fast social transformation ended and a sort of stable equilibrium was reached, probably preserved also in following years.

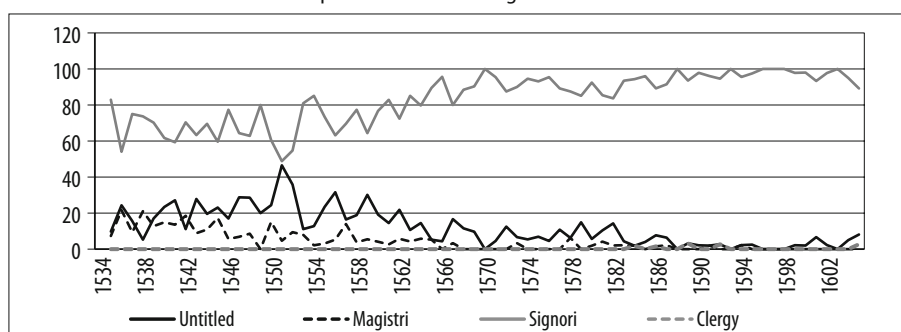
What kind of interpretation can be given of such transformations? Recapitulating, godparenthood was an important social institution, on which a vast network of social relationships was based. As a result of the reduction in number of godparents, looking at humble children godparenthood seems to be pushed towards relative verticalization; looking instead at high born children, godfathers are now chosen among their parents' peers, with a drastic reduction in number of the ties with lower social ranks. When they are obliged to choose only one godfather instead of many, the populations of the communities I studied prefer those candidates having the highest social rank and the best endowment of material resources.

27 ALFANI, G.: «La famille spirituelle des prêtres», Op. cit.

Graph 5. Godfathers of Untitled children



Graph 6. Godfathers of Signori children



Considering that people of lower social ranks were much more numerous than those of the higher ones what happens to the social ties of Untitled people is particularly important. The Church had wanted godparenthood to become a more horizontal tie, between social peers. Instead, in almost all the communities I studied the reform had opposite effects: in parallel to the reduction in number of godfathers, the tie between godfather and godchild (and his parents) became more vertical, because the social distance between them increased²⁸.

It is probable that this social phenomenon, against which effective means of intervention were lacking, played an important role in convincing the Church that it could not really control what godfathers did. Already at the beginning of XVIIth Century, this aim seems to have been definitively abandoned. Nevertheless, the issue of the Christian education of children remained critical, especially given the context: defence against the spread of the Reformation was vital for the Catholic Church. I think that, having found godparenthood a poor pedagogical instrument,

²⁸ ALFANI, G.: *Padri, padrini, patroni*, Op. cit.

the Catholic Church intensified energies spent on catechism, that became a more and more important issue precisely in the period when the failure of the reform of godparenthood was becoming apparent. At present this is just an hypothesis, but one I think would be worthy of further studies²⁹.

5. Conclusions

On the base of the evidence presented, it should be clear that, before the Council of Trent, many different models of godparenthood were widespread in Italian territory, differing in the maximum admissible number of godfathers, in the presence of godmothers, and so on. Given the importance of godparenthood ties in societies of the time, it would be worthy to further research in which ways the adoption of one model instead of another might have influenced the life and social working of each community.

The Council of Trent aimed at reforming godparenthood as a social institution, in order to better control the occurrence of spiritual incest and to induce godparents to actually perform their duties towards godchildren. To this end, it imposed strict limits to the maximum admissible number of godfathers and godmothers, causing the generalised and partially unexpected adoption of the «couple model»: one godfather and one godmother.

This reform was not devoid of attempts at resistance, that in many places obliged local clergy to accept compromises, albeit for a limited period of time: at the end of XVIth Century, in all communities I studied the couple model had been definitively imposed. This transformation was parallel to another one, completely contrary to what had been the will of the Council: having to choose only one godfather instead of the many they were accustomed to, people preferred the most powerful and influential, causing a tendential verticalization of godparenthood as a social institution: it ended up resembling a sort of social patronage. This fact ultimately convinced the Church of the scarce usefulness of godparenthood as a pedagogical instrument, so that it lost much of its interest in it³⁰. Probably, it also strengthened a «godfather» ideal (the

29 About post-Tridentine catechism, see BOSSY, J.: *Christianity in the West*, Op. cit..

30 This lack of interest is testified by the long silence of Roman Catholic Church on the matter of godparenthood. Only in XXth Century did the Church modify what stated by the Council of Trent, and then it seemingly ratified a decline and loss of relevance of such social institution. In fact, in 1917 the new Code of Canon Law limited the extent of spiritual kinship, recognizing its existence only between godfather, godmother and minister of baptism on one side, the baptised child on the other. In this way, the ties of spiritual kinship between godparents and parents of the child simply disappeared: a striking occurrence, considering that precisely those ties had the greatest social importance in the Early Modern Age. In 1983, the latest version of the Code of Canon Law appeared, containing no reference of any sort to spiritual kinship: in this way it has totally disappeared from Roman Catholic world, together with the impediments to marriage it once brought with itself. See ALFANI, G.: *Dalle pratiche alla norma*, op. cit. and *Padri, padrini, patroni*, Op. cit.

godfather as a protector, as somebody to whom to ask favours, etc.) that helped the lexical and semantic shift from the «true» godfather to the Mafia one.

This deep social transformation, striking both for having happened quite fast and for its extent and implications, up to now had passed practically unnoticed. Surely it will merit further studies.

What are the causes of such neglect? It seems to me that an important role has been played by a long lasting misjudgement. In fact, godparenthood has long being thought of as a declining institution already at the end of Middle Ages, at least in Europe: a transplanting in the fertile lands of the New World would have given it new strength, preserving its social relevance up to contemporary Latin American models of «compadrazgo». My data instead, as well those coming from some other researches, suggests that godparenthood was still flourishing at the beginning of XVIth Century: proof being the tenacious resistance that the projects of reforming it encountered, both inside the Council of Trent and, after, at the level of the communities.

The equilibrium apparently reached by godparenthood between the end of XVIth Century and the beginning of XVIIth should not induce to think neither that from that time on it was declining, nor that it did not cross other important phases of change and transformation, especially since accurate studies for XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries are very few in number. In this regard, lasting vitality of godparenthood can be hypothesized considering its «unofficial» (i.e. not recognised by the Church) variants.

It is well known that, in Latin America, being prohibited to increase the number of godfathers at baptism due to the limits imposed by the Council of Trent, the occasions requiring the presence of a godfather were multiplied: also in these cases, a godparenthood tie was recognized, whose model was baptismal godparenthood. These practices are still widespread: according to areas, godfathers for the first hair cut of children, or for a new house or motorcycle, godmothers for the first earrings etc. can be found³¹.

Curiously, in the literature about godparenthood it is often forgotten that many of these customs were widespread also in Europe. In the case of Italy, anthropological surveys conducted in 1950s and 1960s proved the diffusion in large areas of «popular» variants of spiritual kinship not recognized by the Church³².

31 About the introduction of godparenthood in the New World, see NUTINI, H. G. and BELL, B.: *Ritual Kinship: The Structure and Historical Development of the Compadrazgo System in Rural Tlaxcala*, Princeton, 1980-1984, and FOSTER G. M.: «Cofradia and compadrazgo», Op. cit.

32 Such surveys have been conducted by ANDERSON, G.: «A survey of Italian Godparenthood», *The Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers*, XV, 1956, pp. 1-110, and «Il comparaggio: the Italian Godparenthood Complex», *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, XIII, 1957, pp. 32-53. More recently, these pioneer researches have been continued by Italo Signorini and his collaborators: see SIGNORINI, I.: «Forme di comparatico italiano», monographic issue of the review *L'Uomo*, XI, 1987.

Comparing this situation with what happened in Latin America is tempting: when the chances of obtaining godparents officially recognized by the Church were drastically reduced, alternatives were found. As far as Europe is concerned, the following hypothesis would be worthy of further checks: these «popular» practices exploded after the Council of Trent, in response to the new, much stricter law? If this is the case, we would be facing a situation in which a population that badly accept an unwanted and forcefully imposed change looks for instruments for reducing its social impact: i.e., for safeguarding a network of social relationships that risks collapsing.

The abundant evidence of such practices relative to the first half of XXth Century corroborates, in a certain measure, the above hypothesis. Nevertheless it is necessary to proceed cautiously, because kinds of spiritual kinship non recognized by the Church existed already at the end of XVIth Century, when many synods tried to put an end to them³³.

For this reason, what I suggest is not, or not only, to look for the origin of such practices, but to measure their diffusion and intensity before and after the Council: clearly a difficult and maybe impossible task due to the lack of sources, but surely one that could spread some light on important but little-studied social customs.

These studies proved the spread in vast areas of Italy of unofficial customs of godparenthood: for example, the «commare de coppula» (the woman that washes the baby's bonnet and through this act becomes his godmother); the «comare dell'orecchia» (the woman that for the first time pierces the ears of a girl, often also granting her the first earrings); the «compare» (godparent) of the first haircut; the «compare di San Giovanni», etc. In the latter case, jumping together across a bonfire in a particular night, usually 24th June (St. John the Baptist), young people become «godparents of St. John», forging a pact of love, friendship or brotherhood. Such practice, already described by Anderson, recently has been studied in depth by FINE, A.: *Parrains, marraines*, Op. cit., who found it widespread in Corsica.

33 For example, the case of «commare di coppula» was discussed at the Carpi synod of 1571, and at the Amalfi one of 1594. Anyway, the problem had already emerged, well before the Council of Trent, at the provincial council of Benevento, in 1470. See CORRAIN, Cl. and ZAMPINI, P.: *Documenti etnografici e folkloristici nei sinodi diocesani italiani*, Bologna, 1970.